



A study of the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English in terms of gender, style and individual identity. The subjects of the study are 15 female university students and 15 male university students. The data is collected by means of audio recording in the classroom discussion and in the interviews. The examined discourse markers are *like, yeah, oh, you know, well, I mean, right, ok* and *actually*, and a total of 1292 tokens for these discourse markers are identified in the subjects' classroom discussion and in the subjects' interviews. The results of the study show that: (1) the female subjects use discourse markers more frequently than the male subjects. (2) all the subjects employ discourse markers in the interviews at a higher rate than in the classroom discussion. (3) the subjects' individual identity has the effects on their use of discourse markers. (4) the subjects display their individual variations in their frequencies of discourse markers in the interviews and in the classroom discussion respectively.

KEYWORDS: discourse marker, acquisition, Chinese learner of English, sociopragmatics.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio investiga la adquisición de los marcadores discursivos de los estudiantes chinos de inglés en lo relativo al sexo, el estilo y la identidad individual. Las personas investigadas son 15 estudiantes universitarias y 15 estudiantes universitarios. Se recogen los datos mediante grabación de audio en forma de discusión en clase y entrevista. Los marcadores discursivos investigados son: *like, yeah, oh, you know, well, I mean, right, ok* y *actually*. En la discusión y la entrevista, se identifican 1292 marcadores discursivos. El resultado del estudio demuestra que: (1) Las personas investigadas femeninas utilizan los marcadores discursivos con más frecuencia que los masculinos. (2) Todos los sujetos investigados utilizan los marcadores discursivos en la entrevista con más frecuencia que en la discusión en clase. (3) La utilización de marcadores discursivos de los sujetos investigados está influida por la identidad individual. (4) Los sujetos investigados muestran variación de frecuencia en el uso de los marcadores discursivos en la entrevista y la discusión en clase.

PALABRAS CLAVE: los marcadores discursivos, la adquisición, estudiantes chinos del inglés, la pragmática social.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers, as defined by Schiffrin, are “sequentially dependent elements which brick unit of talk” (Schiffrin, 1987:31) and serve a variety of functions in the organization of the speaker’s discourse. In English language, discourse markers that have received the most attention include lexical forms such as *well, now, but, so, then, finally, actually, Ok, right, I mean* and *You know*, as well as non-lexical fillers such as *oh, uh, um* (Fraser, 1990; Redeker, 1990; Clark, 1994). In French language, several studies have been made on the functions of *eh bein* (well), *enfin* (finally), *alors* (then), *mais* (but), *bon/ben* (variants of good). The majority of these studies focus on the textual use of these forms in adult speech, and describe how they: (1) create coherence and structure within a discourse by coordinating speech acts, turns and propositional contents; (2) provide feedback from the listener about whether a prior utterance has been understood or not, or whether he/she agrees or disagrees; (3) signal and clarify problems on the part of the speaker.

A function of discourse markers that has not been systematically studied is their use as markers of sociopragmatic function concerning social relationships between the interlocutors, relative status of the speaker and the hearer, as well as their level of familiarity/intimacy, topic and setting of their discourse. When these discourse markers are used in the “participation framework” plane of discourse (Schiffrin, 1987), they carry little or no semantic content and are not grammatically required in the utterance. For example, in the utterance “Well, now tomorrow you can finish your writing essay”, *now* is used as a discourse marker rather than a temporal adverb both by prosody (tonic stress followed by a pause and phonological reduction) and by the semantics of the proposition to which it is attached. Here the normal meaning of *now* is canceled because the proposition explicitly refers to a future time. The use of both *well* and *now* to introduce the utterance indicates a sense of authority and shows that the speaker has greater power than the hearer (professor to student).

In contrast to the rich array of studies on the textual use of discourse markers, there have been considerably fewer studies focusing on L2 learners’ acquisition of discourse markers from the perspective of sociopragmatics. In order to contribute to literature of this line, this paper aims to study the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English in terms of sociopragmatics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE ACQUISITION OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

Previous studies on the acquisition of discourse markers have been made in different fields. One of these fields is studies of children’s acquisition of discourse markers in their native language. These studies describe how children learn the textual functions of discourse markers in English (Spratt, 1992), in French (Jisa, 1984/1985) and in Hebrew (Berman, 1996). Spritt

(1992) analyses 128 children's verbal disputes for the development of discourse markers *because, so, and, but* and *well*. The results of this study show that: (1) the discourse markers are primarily used to mark the exchange structure of discourse when they are first used by children ranging in age from 2.7 to 3.6 years old; (2) the global level of discourse is not marked by children until their 4th year (3.6–4.0 years old); (3) the first discourse markers used by children are *because* and *but*, both of which have particular importance in disputes because they mark reasons and contradictions. Lisa (1984/1985) examines *et pis* (the counterpart of English “and then”) in the speech of monolingual French children ranging in age from 3 to 5 years old in a classroom-based “show and tell” session. The results of this study indicate that: (1) the younger children encode a wider variety of logico- semantic relations with *et pis*; (2) the older children narrow down the range of logico-semantic relations encoded by *et pis* and show an increase in other structures which accomplish the same tasks. Berman (1996) considers the relationship between form and function in language acquisition through analysis of the Hebrew morpheme *ve* (the counterpart of English “and”) in early conversational interactions and in narratives of children aged 3 to 9 years old compared with adults. This study shows that in early conversational interchanges as well as subsequently in more extended narratives *and* first serves as an empty discourse filler, indicating merely that more utterances are to come, and subsequently it is used for linear chaining of events along the time line, together with *and* and increasingly replaced by explicit markers of sequentiality such as *after that*.

Some studies have been conducted on the acquisition of discourse markers by non-native speakers in target language as second language. Sankoff *et al.* (1997) investigate the use of discourse markers in English and in French by English learners of French as second language in Montreal, Canada. They find that learners generally tend to use discourse markers less frequently in their L2 (i.e. French) than in their native language (i.e. English) and that those who are more integrated into the local francophone community have more native-like use of discourse markers, especially those who have been exposed to French since their childhood. Regarding the use of discourse markers in English as second language context, Fuller (2003a) compares the use of discourse markers by native English speakers and by non-native English speakers in different contexts—interviews and conversations. Her findings support all the previous studies on the use of discourse markers by non-native English speakers that overall non-native English speakers use fewer discourse markers than native English speakers. Even though her results indicate that there is a higher rate of the use of *you know* by non-native English speakers than the rate of the use of *you know* by native English speakers, she suggests that non-native English speakers' discourse is characterized by formulaic use of discourse markers which are easy to acquire. Besides, non-native English speakers in her study do not show differences across different contexts as native English speakers do when their speaker roles change. In contrast to Fuller's study which investigates highly proficient non-native English speakers, Hellermann and Vergun (2007) focus on adult immigrants as beginning

learners of English, a population with chances to develop their English in their daily work and life. They suggest that more highly proficient students demonstrate more frequent use of discourse markers and they also appear to be more acculturated to English-speaking culture.

Studies have also been done to investigate the acquisition of discourse markers by non-native speakers in target language as foreign language. Romero Trillo (2002) uses a corpus-driven approach to examine the use of discourse markers in English by native children and adults and by non-native children and adults. He concludes that native children and non-native children show a similar pattern in their use of discourse markers, whereas non-native adults fossilize in their L2 pragmatic development due to the lack of discourse marker instruction. Based on corpus-driven analysis, Muller (2005) compares a corpus of American native speakers of English with that of German non-native speakers of English in which participants retell and discuss a silent movie in a university setting. Besides using quantitative analysis in frequency counts, she also distinguishes individual functions for each discourse marker and discusses both linguistic and non-linguistic factors that might influence the frequency of discourse markers. Her findings show that native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English prefer different discourse markers and there are differences in the usage of the individual functions. Fung and Carter (2007) compare the production of discourse markers by native speakers of English from a corpus of spoken British English with the production of discourse markers by non-native speakers of English from a corpus of classroom discourse in Hong Kong. They find a considerable discrepancy in the use of discourse markers between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English. Non-native speakers of English use discourse markers at a very restricted level and with limited functions. The above three studies provide a preliminary description of differences between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English in their use of discourse markers. However non-native speakers of English are in English as foreign language.

Studies on the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English have been carried out by several researchers. The first is He Anping (2002), who expresses the overuse of the discourse marker *so* in Chinese EFL learners' written English based on the corpora including the discourse of both native English speakers and Chinese learners of English. Based on the comparison of data from the Hong Kong component (ICE-HK) and the British component (ICE-GB) of the International Corpus of English (ICE), Bolton Kingsley (2002) focuses on connector usage in the writing of university students in Hong Kong and in Great Britain. The results show both groups of students, native English speakers and Chinese learners of English, overuse a wide range of connectors. The results offer no evidence of significant underuse. Ran (2002) discovers that in verbal communication, the discourse marker *you know* is found not to contribute to the prepositional content of the utterances to which it is attached. Instead, it is used as adaptive evidence to help manage and maintain the ongoing interaction. *You know* can serve as a meta-language indicator, and its function of calling attention is evident.

He concludes that such a discourse marker appears as a result of adaptation to the context in communication. The study by Yu and Wu (2003) shows that discourse markers work as a linguistic component that does not exert any effect on the truth-value of the utterance, but expresses attitudinal and procedural meanings. They reflect the adaptation made by language users to contexts. Meanwhile, they help language users to construct discourse and perform different pragmatic functions to facilitate communication.

Several studies have been made to explore the roles of metadiscourse in the construction of textual and interpersonal functions of academic papers. The term “metadiscourse” is used in writing to describe a word or a phrase which comments on what is in the sentence. Metadiscourse is defined as “aspects of a text which explicitly organise the discourse, engage the audience and signal the writer’s attitude” (Hyland, 1998), and can also be understood as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assist the writer (speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2005:37). Based on a textual analysis of 28 research articles in four academic disciplines, Hyland (1998) makes a study of how the appropriate use of metadiscourse crucially depends on rhetorical context. This study suggests that metadiscourse reflects one way in which context and linguistic meaning are integrated to allow readers to derive intended interpretations. This study also argues that metadiscourse provides writers with a means of constructing appropriate contexts and a means of alluding to shared disciplinary assumptions. The study of academic metadiscourse can therefore offer insights into an understanding of this concept and illuminate an important dimension of rhetorical variation among disciplinary communities. Hyland (2004) analyses 4 million words of 240 L2 postgraduate dissertations and shows that metadiscourse offers a way of understanding the interpersonal resources writers use to present propositional material and therefore provides a means of uncovering something of the rhetorical and social distinctiveness of disciplinary communities.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, recent second language acquisition theorists have come to recognize that “language learners do not live in idealized, homogeneous communities” (Peirce, 1995:12). They live in this complex social world and each learner varies individually in what they perceive and how they respond to the world. Therefore, instead of treating L2 learners as a homogeneous group, different L2 learners should be regarded as having their multiple desires and showing their individual identities when they conduct their L2 learning. For instance, Siegal (1995) in her study of women learning Japanese in Japan points out that how learners view themselves, their L2 and L2 culture determine to what extent they desire to adopt the native speaker norms. McKay and Lee’s (1996) study of adolescent Chinese immigrants shows that learners’ social identities and their different personal values can influence how much energy they are willing to invest in their English learning. Similarly, Norton (2000) in her study of immigrant women suggests that how much energy language

learners are willing to invest in their learning is closely connected to the multifaceted social identities they construct across different sites over time. Because the acquisition of discourse markers is a part of the acquisition of language, the findings from these studies have implications for this present study.

The above studies have provided valuable insights into the acquisition of discourse markers by children in their native language, the acquisition of discourse markers by non-native speakers in target language as second language, the acquisition of discourse markers by non-native speakers in target language as foreign language, the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English, the use of metadiscourse depending on rhetorical and social contexts and the use of discourse markers depending on gender and individual identity. These studies form a basis of this research framework, on which this present study of the general patterns of the use of discourse markers and the roles of gender, style and individual identity in the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English from the perspective of sociopragmatics is conducted. Here sociopragmatics refers to “the social perceptions underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action” (Gabriele Kasper & Kenneth R. Rose, 2001:2) and the social factors influencing participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative action, including the factors of gender, style and individual identity for the present study.

From the foregoing review of the research literature, we can see that although there have been some studies on the acquisition of discourse markers in the respect of linguistic form, there is little research literature on the acquisition of discourse markers in respect of sociopragmatics, and there is even less research literature about the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English in respect of sociopragmatics. For this reason, this study aims to contribute to the literature on the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English from the perspective of sociopragmatics. This study will give a better understanding of what the acquisition of discourse markers in terms of sociopragmatics is like for Chinese learners of English, and will help language teachers develop Chinese students’ English competence at sociopragmatic level.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research questions

Based on the research objectives discussed above, this study aims to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the patterns of the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English?
2. What are the roles of gender and style in the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English?

3. How does individual identity influence the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English?

3.2. Subjects

This study is conducted in a university in China. Fifteen female students and fifteen male students are randomly selected as the subjects of this study. They are college students ranging in age from 20 to 21 years old. So they show homogeneity in terms of age, education and language proficiency and status. All subjects give consent for their data to be used for this research purpose by signing the consent form prior to data collection. The overview of the subjects is shown in Table 1.

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Birth Place	Major
1	Li	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
2	Zhang	Female	21	Jiangxi	Economics
3	Sun	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
4	Chen	Female	20	Anhui	Economics
5	Huang	Female	21	Zhejiang	Economics
6	Zhou	Female	21	Zhejiang	Economics
7	Gao	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
8	Xie	Female	21	Jiangxi	Economics
9	Pan	Female	20	Anhui	Economics
10	Han	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
11	Su	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
12	Jin	Female	21	Zhejiang	Economics
13	Dai	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
14	Yu	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
15	Cui	Female	20	Zhejiang	Economics
16	Wang	Male	21	Anhui	Engineering
17	Liu	Male	20	Anhui	Engineering
18	Wu	Male	21	Jiangxi	Engineering
19	Xu	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
20	Zhao	Male	21	Jiangxi	Engineering
21	Tang	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
22	Feng	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
23	Zhen	Male	21	Zhejiang	Engineering
24	Luo	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
25	Cai	Male	21	Zhejiang	Engineering
26	Lu	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
27	Yao	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
28	Qiu	Male	21	Zhejiang	Engineering
29	Xia	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering
30	Wei	Male	20	Zhejiang	Engineering

All the names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: Overview of the subjects

3.3. Criteria for the selection of discourse markers

Criteria for selection of discourse markers for this study are based on Fuller's study (2003a) in which he gives two principles for discourse markers. (1) The semantic relationship between the elements that discourse markers connect in the utterance will remain the same if the discourse markers are removed. In other words, discourse markers do not change the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterance. (2) The utterance will still be grammatically intact without the discourse markers. Based on Fuller's (2003a) two principles, the selected discourse markers for this study are *like, yeah, oh, you know, well, I mean, right, ok* and *actually*. *like, yeah, oh, you know, well* and *I mean* are selected because they appear more frequently in Fuller's (2003a) corpus of native English speakers. *right* and *ok* are selected because they are frequently used in academic discourse, especially in lectures and seminars (Schleef, 2004). *Actually* is selected because I find that it is used frequently among Mandarin speakers of native Chinese.

3.4. Data collection

Each subject is audio-recorded in two different settings. In the first setting, the subjects are led to a discussion section of an English class where they discuss the text which has been learned. The recorded classroom discussion is 150 minutes. To minimize any effects of the researcher's presence and elicit the most authentic discourse, the researcher is required not to sit in the classroom and the digital recorder is put on the classroom table to audio-record each subject's utterances in the classroom discussion. In the second setting, individual sociolinguistic interviews are conducted and audio-recorded by the researcher outside classroom. The recorded interviews last 150 minutes and include such topics as English learning experiences, participation in university classes, daily activities, and any other personal experiences they are willing to share. The subjects are informed that the interviews are more like casual conversations without knowing the fact that their use of discourse markers is the research target. Therefore, the classroom discussion and the interviews can be considered to be relatively authentic and can display the subjects' natural use of discourse markers in these two settings. In these two settings, there are different roles that the subjects play (student versus interviewee), different topics that they cover (classroom discussion versus small talk) and different contexts where the subjects' utterances are recorded (classroom versus outside classroom).

3.5. Data analysis

The classroom discussion and the interviews are transcribed for analysis and nine discourse markers *like, yeah, oh, you know, I mean, well, right, ok* and *actually* are identified and counted, yielding a total of 1292 tokens. Once discourse markers are selected as valid tokens, they are coded in the analysis regardless of internalized use and non-native use. The encoded data are analysed quantitatively in order to display a general picture of: (1) the subjects' patterns of the

use of discourse markers (2) the subjects' roles of gender and style in their use of discourse markers (3) the subjects' roles of multifaceted individual identity in their use of discourse markers.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Patterns of the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English

In order to address the first question of what the patterns of the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English are, the number of tokens for each discourse marker by each subject in the classroom discussion and in the interviews in this study are counted. Then their use of discourse markers is compared with the use of discourse markers by native English speakers found in previous studies. However, it is realized that the current data of the subjects is not parallel to the data of native English speakers in other studies, nor is it conclusive about all Chinese learners of English. Therefore, findings compared with the data of the use of discourse markers by native English speakers are aimed to show a suggestive picture of what subjects' patterns of the use of discourse markers are.

Frequencies of each discourse marker by each subject in the classroom discussion and in the interviews are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

It can be seen from Table 2 that the results of the data of the subjects support Schlee's data of native English speakers that *ok* and *right* are preferred in the classroom discussion because *ok* and *right* have the unique structure of academic speech. Schlee's (2004) study of discourse markers in academic discourse by native English instructors and by native English students shows that the use of *ok* and *right* is more frequent than the use of *like* and *you know*, especially when *ok* and *right* are used as progression checks and transition markers. However, As can be shown in Table 2, discrepancy is found in the data of the subjects in the classroom discussion from native English speakers' usage of discourse markers that the use of *you know*, *like*, *oh*, *well*, *yeah*, and *I mean* by the subjects is less frequent than that of native English speakers. In Fuller's (2003a) study of the use of discourse markers by native English speakers between 20 and 35 years old, she finds that the most prevalent discourse markers in the data of native English speakers are *you know*, *like*, *oh*, *well*, *yeah*, and *I mean*. Similarly, Romero Trillo (2002) finds that *you know*, *I mean*, and *well*, which are referred to as involvement markers which enhance the involvement of the listener in the thinking process, are more frequently used in native English speakers' utterances. Table 2 shows some differences from the previous studies of native English speakers in the use of *you know*, *like*, *oh*, *well*, *yeah*, and *I mean* by the subjects in the classroom discussion and there appears to be a good deal of variation in the use of discourse markers by the subjects.

Name	Gender	Frequency of Discourse Markers								
		like	yeah	oh	you know	well	I mean	right	ok	actually
Li	Female	4	2	2	1	0	0	6	7	1
Zhang	Female	6	2	0	3	0	0	10	7	2
Sun	Female	4	2	3	0	0	0	0	5	6
Chen	Female	5	2	0	2	0	0	8	7	2
Huang	Female	6	1	0	3	0	0	10	6	2
Zhou	Female	5	2	0	2	0	0	7	6	2
Gao	Female	6	2	0	2	0	0	9	7	2
Xie	Female	6	2	0	3	0	0	8	6	1
Pan	Female	5	2	0	3	0	0	9	7	2
Han	Female	6	1	0	3	0	0	8	7	2
Su	Female	5	2	0	3	0	0	10	7	1
Jin	Female	6	2	0	2	0	0	8	6	2
Dai	Female	5	2	0	2	0	0	10	7	2
Yu	Female	6	2	0	3	0	0	10	7	1
Cui	Female	6	2	0	2	0	0	9	7	2
Wang	Male	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	6	1
Liu	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	5	2	0
Wu	Male	2	0	1	1	0	0	2	2	2
Xu	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	4	2	0
Zhao	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	5	2	0
Tang	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	4	2	0
Feng	Male	2	1	1	0	0	0	5	3	0
Zhen	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	4	2	0
Luo	Male	2	2	1	0	0	0	5	2	0
Cai	Male	2	2	0	0	0	0	5	2	0
Lu	Male	2	1	1	0	0	0	4	3	0
Yao	Male	1	2	1	0	0	0	5	1	0
Qiu	Male	2	2	0	0	0	0	3	4	0
Xia	Male	2	2	1	1	0	0	4	2	0
Wei	Male	1	2	1	0	0	0	3	4	0

Table 2: Frequency of each discourse marker by each subject in the classroom discussion

Name	Gender	Frequency of Discourse Markers								
		like	yeah	oh	you know	well	I mean	right	ok	actually
Li	Female	8	10	1	5	0	0	2	0	1
Zhang	Female	13	6	2	10	0	0	2	2	0
Sun	Female	10	7	3	5	0	0	0	0	4
Chen	Female	11	6	1	8	0	0	1	2	0
Huang	Female	12	5	2	9	0	0	2	1	0
Zhou	Female	11	7	1	8	0	0	2	2	0
Gao	Female	12	5	2	7	0	0	2	1	0
Xie	Female	10	6	1	9	0	0	2	2	0
Pan	Female	12	5	1	8	0	0	1	2	0
Han	Female	11	6	1	9	0	0	1	1	0
Su	Female	12	4	2	9	0	0	2	1	0
Jin	Female	11	5	2	8	0	0	1	2	0
Dai	Female	12	6	2	8	0	0	1	1	0
Yu	Female	11	5	2	7	0	0	2	2	0
Cui	Female	12	6	2	8	0	0	1	2	0
Wang	Male	0	14	2	3	0	0	3	2	1
Liu	Male	2	5	2	5	0	2	3	1	1
Wu	Male	2	16	1	0	2	0	0	0	2
Xu	Male	2	3	2	4	0	0	2	1	1
Zhao	Male	1	4	3	4	0	0	2	1	1
Tang	Male	2	3	4	3	0	0	3	1	1
Feng	Male	2	4	3	4	0	0	2	2	1
Zhen	Male	1	4	2	5	0	0	3	1	1
Luo	Male	2	4	1	5	0	0	3	1	1
Cai	Male	2	3	2	4	0	0	2	2	1
Lu	Male	2	3	4	3	0	0	3	1	1
Yao	Male	2	3	2	5	0	0	2	1	1
Qiu	Male	2	4	1	6	0	0	3	1	1
Xia	Male	2	3	2	5	0	0	3	1	1
Wei	Male	3	4	3	4	0	0	2	2	1

Table 3: Frequency of each discourse marker by each subject in the interviews

Well is one of the most prevalent discourse markers in native English speakers' utterances in Fuller's study (2003a), which indicates that *well* is at the rate of 3.6 tokens in interviews and 5.5 tokens in conversations. But it can be seen from Table 3 that among 30 subjects in this study, only Wu uses *well* as a discourse marker in his interviews, yielding 2 tokens while the other subjects never use it. Moreover, Wu's interview data suggest that he has internalized some use of *well* in the manner of native English speakers in their spoken discourse. According to Schifffrin (1987), one of the uses of *well* is the response to the prior question. It can function as a delay device when the speaker is searching for his/her response as in (1) or a response marker when an upcoming response does not resonate with the prior utterance as in (2).

(1) Researcher: How do you like the life in your university?

Wu: The life, there, well, it is difficult to describe, but, I think it's very, um I should say I am pretty stressed because a lot of pressure from my study something like that.

(2) Researcher: You don't hang about with your classmates? You don't make friends with them?

Wu: Well, I think classmates are just classmates, um I should say of course I will talk to them from time to time and we will discuss our homework or papers together, but that's not friend relationship I think.

Further analysis suggests that Wu seems to only fully acquire the delay device function of *well* preceding an answer which native English speakers employ. His tokens of *well* are all used with answers to the prior questions, and none of the occurrences function as requests or self-responses which native English speakers frequently employ (Schiffrin, 1987). Besides, Wu's expression about his awareness of his use of *well* seems to suggest that his use of *well* may be part of a fixed formulaic utterance in certain situations.

Similar to the results for *well*, only Liu uses *I mean* as a discourse marker in his interview, yielding 2 tokens, whereas the other subjects show no use of *I mean*. When studying *I mean* as a discourse marker, Schiffrin (1987) suggests that one common function of *I mean* is a marker of the speaker's modification, expansion or clarification of the prior utterance. The following excerpts demonstrate that Liu has acquired the function of *I mean* and could use it in his interviews. In (3), *I mean* functions as modification. In (4) it functions as clarification.

(3) Liu: But sometimes they ask me questions, I ask them reply and reply I mean repeat and repeat, something like that.

(4) Liu: I think we are all the same year, I mean we were admitted to this university in the same year, so we became good friends.

The overall infrequent use of *well* and *I mean* by the subjects may suggest that these Chinese learners of English have not yet acquired the native-like use of *well* and *I mean* as discourse markers. One possible explanation may be that there is no equivalence for *well* and *I mean* in Chinese. In Chinese, the equivalent marker to *well* as a delay device would be *um*. The use of *um* by the subjects is 147 tokens. The frequent occurrence of *um* in the data of the subjects confirms my assumption that almost all the subjects do not replace the use of *um* with the use of *well*, a response marker that native English speakers tend to use frequently in their utterances. As for *I mean*, the equivalence in Chinese is *wo de yi si shi*..[我的意思是..](my meaning is...), which contains five Chinese characters with five syllables, and therefore *I mean* is not regarded as a discourse marker. Therefore it is not surprising that *well* and *I mean* do not occur in most of the subjects' spoken discourse. Similarly, this reason can also explain why almost all the subjects employ *actually* as a discourse marker at a higher rate than *well* and *I mean*. The use of *actually* as a discourse marker may be influenced by their frequent use of *qi si* [其实] (actually) as a Chinese discourse marker.

One interesting finding is the high rate of *yeah* as a discourse marker by the subjects in the interviews. As can be shown in Table 3 and Table 7, the use of *yeah* in the interviews is 166 tokens, higher than Fuller's (2003a) study on native English speakers in which the use of *yeah* in the interviews is 14 tokens. Additionally, the specific function of *yeah* as self-repair is found in the discourse of the subjects in addition to its uses to mark transitions, to comment on the

preceding utterance or to indicate agreement, the functions of which occur frequently in native English speakers' utterances. This supports Wong's findings (2000) in which she observes the function of same-turn repair by her subjects of Chinese learners of English. This usage of *yeah* has been found to be rare in the discourse of native English speakers, and this usage of *yeah* is employed by Chinese learners of English to resolve what is problematic or troublesome about the utterance. According to Wong, the use of *yeah* as same-turn repair by Chinese learners of English can be followed by an effective repair, no repair when the speaker is just rechecking the previous utterance, or ineffective repair. Examples (5)–(6) illustrate that a disfluency occurs first, and then the speaker pauses, then self-repair comes after the token *yeah*.

(5) Li: This book is very impor –yeah, important for your study.

(6) Zhang: Although there are some bad –yeah there are some bad parts, you know, some parts I don't like, but at least I can have more opportunity to enjoy this book, maybe different kind of books, and enjoy good time.

The results of frequency of each discourse marker by the subjects in the classroom discussion and in the interviews show that discourse markers may be acquired by Chinese learners of English to a different degree, which confirms earlier research on variation in the use of discourse markers (Sankoff *et al.*, 1997) that non-native English speakers display variation in their use of discourse markers. While Chinese learners of English do use many of the same discourse markers as native English speakers do, they either do not fully adopt the functions of discourse markers used by native English speakers (e.g. *well* and *I mean*) or use different functions of discourse markers from native English speakers (e.g. *yeah*). Besides, influence of L1 transfer of Chinese may explain the reason that specific discourse markers are employed at a higher or lower rate by the subjects, but further research is needed to investigate the possible effects of L1 transfer of Chinese on the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English.

4.2. Roles of gender and style in the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English

In order to answer the second question of what roles of gender and style in the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English are, the number of tokens of discourse markers by gender (female versus male) and by style (classroom discussion versus interview) are counted. Comparisons of frequency of discourse markers by gender and by style are presented in Table 4 and Table 5 respectively. Comparison of each subject's frequency of discourse markers by style are shown in Table 6. A series of ANOVA analysis are performed on the data, yielding significant results for both the gender variable ($p < .05$) and the style variable ($p < .05$). Therefore the results of data analysis are statistically significant.

Table 4 illustrates that the female subjects generally use more discourse markers than the male subjects, which supports the previous studies on native English speakers' discourse that females tend to use more discourse markers than males. But it can be seen that there are individual variations in the subjects' frequency of discourse markers among the same gender. For example, as can be seen in Table 6, Liu uses fewer discourse markers than Wu in the interviews, but Liu employs more discourse markers than Wu in the classroom discussion. As Schleef (2004) suggests, gender variations in the use of discourse markers seem to be heavily dependent on context and conversational role. Context and conversational role are reflective of style to some degree. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the style factor influences the use of discourse markers by the subjects in addition to the gender factor.

Gender Style	Frequency of Discourse Markers		Difference
	Female	Male	
Interviews	448	272	176
Classroom Discussion	399	173	226
Total	847	445	402

Table 4: Comparison of frequency of discourse markers by gender

Style Gender	Frequency of Discourse Markers		Difference
	Interviews	Classroom Discussion	
Female	448	399	49
Male	272	173	99
Total	720	572	148

Table 5: Comparison of frequency of discourse markers by style

Name	Gender	Frequency of Discourse Markers		Difference
		Interviews	Classroom Discussion	
Li	Female	27	23	4
Zhang	Female	35	30	5
Sun	Female	29	20	9
Chen	Female	29	26	3
Huang	Female	31	28	3
Zhou	Female	31	24	7
Gao	Female	29	28	1
Xie	Female	30	26	4
Pan	Female	29	28	1
Han	Female	29	27	2
Su	Female	30	28	2
Jin	Female	29	26	3
Dai	Female	30	28	2
Yu	Female	29	29	0
Cui	Female	31	28	3
Wang	Male	25	16	9

Liu	Male	21	12	9
Wu	Male	23	10	13
Xu	Male	15	11	4
Zhao	Male	16	12	4
Tang	Male	17	11	6
Feng	Male	18	12	6
Zhen	Male	17	11	6
Luo	Male	17	12	5
Cai	Male	16	11	5
Lu	Male	17	11	6
Yao	Male	16	10	6
Qiu	Male	18	11	7
Xia	Male	17	12	5
Wei	Male	19	11	8

Table 6: Comparison of each subject's frequency of discourse markers by style

As can be seen in Table 5 and Table 6, all the subjects use discourse markers at a higher rate in the interviews than in the classroom discussion, which contrasts with Fuller's (2003a) study that non-native English speakers reveal no difference in the use of discourse markers in different contexts or between different speaker's roles. Three possible reasons can be suggested to explain this phenomenon. They are: (1) the different types of discourse between the classroom discussion and the interviews (2) the different roles played by the subjects in the classroom discussion and in the interviews. (3) the different functions of discourse markers.

Firstly the different types of discourse are prepared in different ways. The content of the classroom discussion is usually prepared beforehand and discourse markers are usually not a required part of the prepared discourse, whereas the interviews are unlikely to be planned beforehand and therefore the subjects use more discourse markers to facilitate their interviews. Sun's notes confirm this assumption that she tends to use discourse markers less frequently in the classroom discussion than in the interviews. Her prepared notes for the classroom discussion are shown in (7).

- (7) Sun: Last week we learned the text about traffic problems in cities. Today I'd like to propose some methods of how to solve this problem. The best method to solve traffic problems is to develop public transport systems. For example, buses, light rail, etc.

Secondly, the subjects' roles as students in the classroom discussion and as interviewees in the interviews might influence the formality of their discourse. As members in the classroom discussion, the subjects are aware of their roles as students learning English and doing academic discussion, and thus they tend to avoid using informal and colloquial discourse markers (e.g. *like* and *you know*). The only discourse markers used more frequently in the classroom discussion are *ok* and *right* because these two markers function as devices for the subjects to check their peers' understanding of previous utterance, ask for confirmation and mark transitions to next utterance. (8)–(10) illustrate the subjects' use of *ok* and *right* in the classroom discussion.

- (8) Li: Ok, let's go to today's topic. Ok, um today we will discuss how to solve traffic problems in cities.
- (9) Zhang: Ok. That is the proposal we got right? A practical method. Ok, so since I have this one, then I want to tell you the end.
- (10) Wu: Ok. Basically that's caution. Um we are discussing how to improve traffic conditions in cities. We learned that method in the text last week. Right?

Finally, as just mentioned, it is not surprising the frequently-used discourse markers in the classroom discussion are *ok* and *right* because they are used to facilitate academic discourse. However, the frequently-used discourse markers in the interviews are *you know*, *like*, and *yeah*. These phenomena can be explained with the functions of these discourse markers. Schifffrin (1987) suggests that *you know* is used frequently in narratives because it allows the speaker to solicit the hearer's affirmation, helps the hearer to filter through the story and then creates a joint focus on speaker-provided information. Since the topics included in the interviews in this study are related to the subjects' daily lives, opinions and past experiences, in which the speaker requires the hearer's reception. Therefore *you know* is used more frequently in the interviews than in the classroom discussion where information about English language and traffic issues are exchanged. (11) and (12) show how *you know* is used in the interviews.

- (11) Wang: The university life is fine, because you know I spent 2 years here, and also during the past year, um you know, I studied English hard and passed English Test Band 4 so, it makes me create more confidence to talk with my classmates in English.
- (12) Wu: You know I joined the Music Club in my University, and feel like, um I like to appreciate beautiful melody of Beethoven's Symphony No.5, you know, before I joined the Club, I admired Beethoven for a while, at that time I made up my mind to learn something about his music.

Another more frequently-used discourse marker in the interviews is *like*. The function of *like* is categorised as focuser *like*, functioning as a marker of new and focused information. As discourse marker *like* is suggested to focus on the status of information just presented in an interaction, it is not surprising that *like* occurs more frequently in dyadic interactions where the subjects try to make information or opinions salient, present uncertain information, or introduce examples (Fuller, 2003b). (13) and (14) illustrate the use of *like* in the interviews.

- (13) Li: When I used iphone 4, not too many cities had that service, but nowadays it's like all over the country.
- (14) Sun: I don't think I am good at talking with boys. I don't know, like my class, there are a few of boys, but they are very very, I think they are very very nice people, yeah, but like if you don't talk with them, they just ignore you.

Name	Gender	Frequency of <i>Yeah</i>		Difference
		Interviews	Classroom Discussion	
Li	Female	10	2	8
Zhang	Female	6	2	4
Sun	Female	7	2	5
Chen	Female	6	2	4
Huang	Female	5	1	4
Zhou	Female	7	2	5
Gao	Female	5	2	3
Xie	Female	6	2	4
Pan	Female	5	2	3
Han	Female	6	1	5
Su	Female	4	2	2
Jin	Female	5	2	3
Dai	Female	6	2	4
Yu	Female	5	2	3
Cui	Female	6	2	4
Wang	Male	14	0	14
Liu	Male	5	2	3
Wu	Male	16	0	16
Xu	Male	3	2	1
Zhao	Male	4	2	2
Tang	Male	3	2	1
Feng	Male	4	1	3
Zhen	Male	4	2	2
Luo	Male	4	2	2
Cai	Male	3	2	1
Lu	Male	3	1	2
Yao	Male	3	2	1
Qiu	Male	4	2	2
Xia	Male	3	2	1
Wei	Male	4	2	2

Table 7: Comparison of each subject's frequency of *yeah* by style

As shown in Table 7, *yeah* is predominantly employed more frequently by the subjects in the interviews than in the classroom discussion. Two reasons can be postulated to explain this phenomenon. First, *yeah* usually occurs in the dyadic interaction when one speaker in the conversation displays attention, understanding, agreement, or response to a previous turn by the other speaker. Unlike in the classroom discussion context where one speaker dominates most of the talk at a time, the two interlocutors in the interview context usually take turns in their interaction. There are more turn-taking situations in the interviews than in the classroom discussion, and as a result, much more tokens of *yeah* occur in the interviews. Second, as Wong (2000) proposes in her study of *yeah* in non-native English speakers' English conversation, *yeah* may serve as a "self-presentational display" (Wong, 2000:60). Non-native English speakers are generally more attentive of their language when they speak; and they may want to present to their interlocutors that they can competently manage their language. Thus, they would use *yeah* as a way to repair or recheck any possible trouble sources. Although Wong's study only focuses on *yeah* in the environment of repair, the subjects are also found to use *yeah* frequently to mark transitions, to confirm, to elaborate or to comment on their preceding

utterances. As can be seen in (15), Zhang closes her response with *yeah* to signal her closing the topic and also confirms to what she has responded, and in (16), Sun further elaborates why she thinks Hangzhou is better than Shanghai. Li and Wang's much higher frequency of different functions of *yeah* as shown in the following excerpts (17) and (18) seems to further suggest that the subjects tend to be constantly aware of their language in the interaction. When engaging in the dyadic interaction, the subjects generally use more devices to maintain the flow of the conversation and make their language more understandable. These functions of *yeah* as well as function of repair suggest that the use of *yeah* is part of non-native English speakers' unique stylistic repertoire.

- (15) Researcher: You mentioned that before you came to Zhejiang, you had been in Jiangxi for three years. What were you doing there?
 Zhang: Um... for my high school' studies. Yeah.
- (16) Sun: I think right now Hangzhou is much better, like you have a lot of scenic spots, you know, much better than Shanghai , yeah, that's like a entertainment city, whatever you want if you have money.
- (17) Li: Um... I think this is the second version- yeah of my term paper. Maybe I am not pretty sure about that, yeah, I think I am still trying to improve my paper, something like that yeah.
- (18) Wang: We play outside, yeah, we play badminton outside, because it's a pretty outdoor activity. We just play for fun without net yeah, not for competition yeah just kind of practice, practice skill yeah.

The above discussion shows that although there are gender and stylistic differences in the use of discourse markers by the subjects, gender and style should not be considered as the only factors influencing their use of discourse markers since another factor of individual identity also interacts with their use of discourse markers, even within a homogeneous group. Therefore, how individual identity might influence individuals' different level of acquisition and individuals' different frequency of discourse markers will be explored.

4.3 Roles of individual identity in the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English

In order to answer the third question of how individual identity influences the use of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English, the subjects' multifaceted individual identities in the classroom discussion and in the interviews are analysed. Here individual identity refers to a person's conception and expression of his or her individuality. The thirty subjects speak the same native language of Chinese, have similar educational background, and learn English in the formal EFL setting in China. However, as can be seen in Table 2 and Table 3, they display differences in the use of discourse markers among themselves. Their differences in the use of discourse markers result not only from their gender and stylistic differences, but also from their individual identity differences. The subjects in this study have two individual identities. On one

hand, being Chinese learners of English, the subjects are university students who pursue their academic studies, and they have the nature of academic identity. On the other hand, being Chinese learners of English, the subjects are human beings who have the desire to share their feelings with other people, and they have the nature of sociable identity. Therefore their identity may have the effects on their use of discourse markers. The effects of the subjects' individual identity on their use of discourse markers will be discussed.

4.3.1. Identity as academic persona

The subjects are a group of students who conduct their English learning for their university academic courses, and they try to present themselves as academic persona.

Table 6 indicates that Sun employs fewer discourse markers in her classroom discussion than the other fourteen female subjects in their classroom discussion. There are two reasons for this phenomenon. The first reason is her academic identity as student. Although she realizes that native English speakers frequently use discourse markers such as *you know*, *like*, *yeah* and *well*, she is unwilling to follow these colloquial words, which results in her less frequency of these informal discourse markers in her academic discourse. As a university student, Sun constructs her identity as academic persona in English and adapts herself to a style of academic written English, which is badly needed for her studies in the field of economics. One example which illustrates her academic persona is when she is asked if she has experienced any difficulty in her classroom discussion, she replies "Before I came here. I had been studying English for six years. I am more experienced in using English.", and she emphasizes her confidence in the classroom discussion. The second reason is her devotion to her studies, and she does not have enough time to actively socialize with her classmates, which limits her opportunity for her language socialization. As a result, Sun' data display her lower rate of the use of discourse markers in her classroom discussion than the other fourteen female subjects in their classroom discussion.

4.3.2. Identity as sociable persona

The subjects are a group of human beings who have the feelings to express and the desire to communicate with other people, and they try to present themselves as sociable persona.

Table 6 shows that Zhang uses more discourse markers in her interviews than the other fourteen female subjects in their interviews. Being a Chinese learner of English, Zhang finds it difficult to adjust herself to her English learning in her university. In (19) Zhang describes her miserable English learning experience.

- (19) Zhang: I wasn't used to college English learning, at the beginning, you know I had a lot of difficult words to understand, like account, like tender, you know, these words have specialized meaning. You know, I suffered a lot from my English learning.

Zhang is somewhat upset because economic English words cause her some trouble in her English learning. Moreover, she expresses how terrible her English learning experience is. This frustration, however, turns out to be a force for her to improve her learning skills and her English. She tries hard and puts much effort into improving her learning skills and her English. In expressing this thought, Zhang frequently uses *you know* for confirmation of the previous utterance or for checking the hearer's understanding of the previous utterance, and *like* for exemplification. Zhang also employs *you know* and *like* to challenge her subordinate position as an incompetent English learner in (20).

- (20) Zhang: You know, English is a little bit difficult for me, but it also depends on, like how much effort I put, like how I learn my English. So, you know, it' like two-side story, I will learn my English well.

Table 6 also shows that Wang uses more discourse markers in his interviews than the other fourteen male subjects in their interviews. This phenomenon is due to his sociable identity as student. He regards English as a communication tool and tries hard to improve his English speaking skills so that he can communicate orally with international experts in the field of engineering. He seeks every opportunity to speak English with his classmates and imitates native English speakers' expressions. Wang describes his English improvement in (21).

- (21) Wang: I want to get rid of my Anhui accent, want to improve my English and make it easier for my classmates to understand me yeah. Even though they can detect pronunciation mistakes at the first sentence I speak, ok they are not native English speakers, that's ok, that's a feature of, yeah, myself, yeah I am from Anhui. I want to delete my accent, I want to lower the barrier, yeah, make communication smooth.

For Wang, his Anhui accent tells his classmates his origin and he wants to improve it. He imitates the native ways of English speaking. His purpose of imitating the native ways of English speaking is to reduce the communication barrier between his classmates and him. Wang is clear that his language choice should match his sociable identity. His awareness of his goal of language use and his active involvement in improving his English result in his higher rate of the use of discourse markers in his interviews than the other fourteen male subjects in their interviews.

5. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to literature on a sociopragmatic understanding of the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English in three aspects. First, although the subjects have acquired the native use of discourse markers to some extent, they either obtain partial acquisition or reveal some discrepancy from native English speakers in the use of the individual

functions of discourse markers. Moreover, unlike other variational studies of L2 speech that show more systematic patterns of variation on the target variable (e.g. -t/d deletion, -ing, plural forms, etc.), there is some variation in the frequency of the subjects' use of discourse markers. The results also support Fung and Carter's (2007) study on the use of discourse markers by Hong Kong L2 speakers in which their ESL learners show restricted range of the use of discourse markers and some unnatural use of discourse markers. Second, the study shows gender and stylistic differences in the use of discourse markers by the subjects. The findings suggest that the female subjects tend to employ discourse markers more frequently than the male subjects and that the subjects tend to use discourse markers more frequently in the interviews than in the classroom discussion. In the classroom discussion, the subjects portray themselves as academic persona, prepare their discussion beforehand, and avoid using colloquial words to perform their academic persona. In addition, the different types of discourse between the classroom discussion and the interviews and different functions of particular discourse markers also explain why particular discourse markers are preferred in particular interactions. Third, the study suggests that generalizations should not be made about the subjects even within a relatively homogenous group. But instead, each subject should be treated as an individual social being with multiple complex identities in his process of discourse marker acquisition. As illustrated in this study, the subjects show their different individual identities, which results in their different frequency of discourse markers.

This study provides a latitude approach to examine the acquisition of discourse markers by Chinese learners of English, and the data are collected in each setting at one time. A longitudinal study is needed to investigate the acquisition of discourse markers over time by Chinese learners of English.

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